

ED383694 1995-06-00 Professional Teacher Development and the Reform Agenda. ERIC Digest.

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Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

Professional Teacher Development and the Reform Agenda. ERIC Digest.....	1
CHALLENGES TO TEACHERS.....	2
TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS REFORM.....	3
CONCLUSION.....	5
REFERENCES.....	5



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A NEW NATIONAL EDUCATION GOAL

The designation of "teacher education and professional development" as one of the

National Education Goals (added to the original six in mid-1994) is genuine recognition that well-prepared teachers are essential to educational reform efforts:

By the year 2000, the nation's teaching force will have access to programs for continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.

The goal suggests that practicing teachers are key to the transformation of schools and that in order for teachers to lead the reform efforts, they need to be offered expanded and enriched professional development experiences. Such experiences should be tied directly to the emerging student performance standards and be continuous, site-based, teacher-designed, and organizationally focused. Professional development programs with these characteristics have to be viewed as essential or core activities that are less vulnerable to budget cuts.

Professional development is an integral part of current efforts to transform and revitalize education. The promise of a high-quality education for all children is dependent not only on a total restructuring of schools, but also on the knowledge and commitment of practitioners to restructuring. As school reform proponents Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller state, "for school restructuring to occur, a combination of factors must be present at the same time and over time--including leadership, a shared mission, school goals, necessary resources, the promotion of collegiality, and the provision of professional growth opportunities for teachers" (Lieberman & Miller, 1990).

CHALLENGES TO TEACHERS

Although education reform initiatives offer great promise, researchers suggest that they also pose significant challenges to teachers as individuals and as members of a wider professional community. According to Judith Little (1993), "one test of teachers' professional development is its capacity to equip teachers individually and collectively to act as shapers, promoters, and well-informed critics of reform" (p.130). At the same time, Little cautions against leveling full responsibility for implementing education reforms on teachers. She has identified five areas as being integrally tied to enhanced teaching and therefore essential to professional development: reforms in subject-matter teaching; equity for diverse student populations; changes in the nature, extent, and use of assessment; the social organization of schools; and the professionalization of teaching. Each suggests the need for teachers to gain new knowledge and enhanced skills.

Authors Mark Smylie and John Conyers (1991) contend that rapid changes in the characteristics, conditions, and learning needs of students will continue; that knowledge about teaching and learning will expand dramatically; and that schools will face ongoing pressures for accountability and reform. They conclude that "these conditions will create unprecedented demands for the development of teachers' knowledge and skills" (p. 12).


TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS REFORM

Schools of Education.


In order to expand professional development and have it fulfill its promise of transforming teaching and learning, new relationships between schools and schools of education must be established. As teachers take greater responsibility for their own professional development and for the operation of their schools, they find less time and desire to pursue university instruction based in large measure on research. At the same time, faculty at colleges and universities find less access to the schools and to practitioners who validate new forms of pedagogy and practice. In this situation, neither party fully benefits from the knowledge of the other. Education school faculty, school district staff developers, and other providers of inservice experiences need to rethink their roles and relationships. Programs that develop or enhance the capacity of these providers are particularly important. Action research and professional development schools are among the emerging concepts that support collaborations among faculty, staff, and field-based practitioners.

Teacher Licensing.


Not surprisingly, the policy community, in a reform posture, is currently focusing much attention on professional development and the establishment of new regulatory policies for licensing and relicensing teachers. Guided by emerging state content or subject-matter frameworks for students, state policymakers are seeking to align all facets of teacher development with these standards. Many states are currently:




- * Restructuring the format for licenses, e.g., by developing initial or probationary licenses for the initial year(s) of teaching and reconsidering standards for advanced practice or specialized areas of practice.




- * Sponsoring alternative providers of continuing education credits, including teacher organizations and for-profit enterprises.




- * Developing or adopting performance-based licensure assessments (such as the new NTE "Praxis" examination) that accompany initial licensure or are used as part of relicensure based on subject-matter standards.




- * Considering or establishing relationships between how graduates perform on licensure examinations and how teacher preparation programs are evaluated.



- * Establishing or working with established teacher professional standards boards that participate in or control the licensure and relicensure function.



- * Considering new forms of salary differentiation for teachers that correspond to new licensure formats.



- * Considering or establishing linkages between the licensure process and national accreditation of teacher education. More than half of the states have established linkages between the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and program approval; all states will have the option of linking NCATE with the state licensure system.

One of the major implications of these developments is a new perspective on the state's accountability function for the continuous performance of teachers. By requiring and supporting induction programs, states are implicitly recognizing that their licensure function means both public accountability and responsibility for support and improvement of teaching practice. The previously separate functions of assessment and professional development are being merged into a new state role that establishes higher, more performance-related standards and takes responsibility for ensuring that teachers can meet the standards. This trend holds promises for increased collaboration among state departments of education, schools, and teacher preparation institutions. The new state role also raises potential concerns, such as conflict of interest in the assessment process and inequities in the licensure system resulting from the uneven conditions of schooling across different districts.

Teacher Certification. The term "teacher certification" has recently come to have the same meaning in education as it does in other professions a designation of advanced practice in a specialized area, based on a voluntary system of application and assessment. Since the mid-1980s, a comprehensive national certification initiative for teaching has been operating with substantial funding from private and corporate foundations and the federal government. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which represents a reform mechanism that contributes to the continuing professional development of teachers, is developing a comprehensive system of

national certification assessments that began operating in late 1994. The National Board, which draws membership and support from both major national teacher unions and a wide range of education constituents, has the potential to affect a broad range of issues through certification. These include:

- * a nationally agreed-upon definition of advanced teaching practice in the individual disciplines and grade levels;
- * state incentives for teachers to apply for certification, including differentiated pay scales;
- * school district hiring practices that would recognize national certification status;
- * equity in the distribution of nationally certified teachers across school districts within a state;
- * differentiated staffing in schools to recognize distinct roles for certified teachers; and
- * reciprocity arrangements across states to recognize the status of nationally certified teachers.

The individualized professional development process associated with National Board certification will likely have an impact on traditional preservice and inservice programs. States may use data on teacher performance on the certification assessments to make judgments about teacher preparation programs. The certification process may also trigger changes in K-12 schools as teachers align their instructional and assessment practices with professional standards. The National Staff Development Council's Standards for Staff Development (1994) offer additional guidance for teacher development and school change.

CONCLUSION

In the current climate of systemic reform, the professional development of teachers has taken on new prominence. There are a host of reasons for this new urgency, ultimately centering on the importance of the classroom teacher in promoting successful student learning. Without the continuous improvement of teaching (and of professional teachers), the reforms will fail. Professional development must serve the purpose of promoting teachers' continuous learning of integrating new knowledge about teaching and learning within the social contexts in which teaching takes place.

REFERENCES

References identified with an EJ or ED number have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. Journal articles (EJ) should be available at most research libraries; most documents (ED) are available in microfiche collections at more than 700 locations.

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